

THE SPIRITUAL HUMANISM or BHIMA BHOI

Bhima Bhoi was neither a metaphysician nor a religious prophet nor a moral philosopher nor even a social reformer in the accepted sense of the terms. Nevertheless from his writings which appear in form of spontaneous outpourings one can unmistakably discern a definite metaphysical vision of reality, a religious perspective, a moral paradigm and a social outlook. The chief motivation which stands out in and through the writings of the philosopher-poet Bhima Bhoi is his utter concern and empathy for the fellow men and fervent zeal to help them come out of the state of decadence and suffering. Every now and then one comes across a couplet expressing his deep agony at the state of affairs in his time. He obviously lived in a period when the society was passing through the most difficult trauma. Despite our rich philosophical legacy he bemoans up people who have fallen into utter ignorance by forgetting God, the Sūnya. As a result people have neither respect for virtue nor fear of sin. In fact the polarities of good and evil are thinned into insignificance. Disorder has become the order of the day.

dinu dinu mahā anartha helāl!i thaya na
rahuchhi dekha brahma-nindā kari
melechha heleni tini bhubanara loka.
pāpa-punyaku kāhāri bhaya nāhin samaste
galeni bhāsi¹.

The planet earth suffers from the dead weight of sin and there is hardly any place for the righteous and saintly people. brahmāl!dare papa bhāra kemante taribi māmi...

santha sādhu kehi rahi na pārile jägā

nühin na Inedini,

prak?tire sarve basa hoichhanli ati
unnjöldä hop.

The distinction between good and evil having been blotted, people at large live by the dictates of the instincts. Man is construed as a sensuous being indistinguishable from animals. Where is the rationality when man is given to the vagaries of whims and caprices ? When rationality is conspicuous by its absence, what to speak of spirituality which constitutes the very essence of every manifestation. Metaphysically Bhima Bhoi was a monist, a non-dualist. Reality is one, sünya and indeterminate. It is the one reality which has manifested in many. Though he appears in form of every finite expression, he himself is indeterminate. The term alekha, sünya nirveda are symbolic of the indeterminate nature of ultimate reality. Reality is of the nature of void having no form or contour- Rupa rekha nähin, he sünya dehi.

It can be found in a stone or a wood but it is not to be equated with his expressions. The concept of immanence and transcendence is so lucidly brought out in Stutichintämapä. This goes to show how the non-dual of advaita, the doctrine of void. sunyata of the Buddhists find a unique blending in the metaphysical views of philosopher in his writings. Though everything is divine it is not to be equated with any of its finite expressions. This makes him vocal against the idol-worship and the religious institutions thffing on it. An idol is an inert, lifeless made up of the mahübhüta. It can hardly satiate the limitless craving of the individual. Man is essentially infinite, therefore his cravings are infinite. A life-less idol can hardly be a saviour of man. It is the height of ignorance to make worldly-offerings to God with the hope of redemption.

achetäre sinä janaprävi mäne karuchhanti

*deva puṇḍrā.
pāde padi rakṣā kara boluchhanti debu
kṣīripuri gaṇḍā.³
X X X*

*murti sina sehi jīvaātma nāhin
kāhun jāchideba bara,
viṣṇu natakuta māyāku na jāni
ajñāna re mudha nard⁴.*

The ignorant are prepared to have loving fellowship with the inert where as the living Gods are ignored. He deplores how people prefer to worship rather than the one who has invested life in them.

*jehu gadhi achhi āpaṇā piṇḍa prāṇa
tāku samarpaṇa nāhin,
dāru pratimā murtiku boluchhanti
prāṇaku banchāa tuhi⁵.*

X X X

*manuṣya hoi nirjība sange bhāvati
dekha kede ajñāna,
sūnyaru jehu piṇḍa prāṇa gadhilā
nāhin tāku anumānā⁶.*

There is paradox in the writings of Bhima Bhoi but it is only apparent. On the one hand his monistic and panentheistic conviction make him say that God is present in every structure. But while decrying idolatry he goes on to say that the stone or piece of wood which makes the idol is bereft of consciousness. While going through his writings one can easily see that philosopher is against idolatry because in accepting idol as the God, the mind of the worshipper is confined to the finite object. In course of time idolater starts thinking that the idol is the only divinity and anything other than the idol are un-divine. In other words an idolater worships a finite God who is really infinite, locates him in a particular place who is all-pervasive. He reserves

his devotion, offerings and all finer emotion only for the idol with the exclusion of the rest.

He was painfully aware and vehemently critical of the ostentatious ritualism which was an unfortunate aftermath of idol-worship. In later Hinduism elaborate rituals are over around the sacred deity. He says that in spiritual pursuit, devotion to oneself (*ātma bhakti*) is the true devotion. Observances of rites and rituals militates against the realization of godhood. People waste their precious life in mechanical rites, rituals forgetting that it is only through love of the inner self that immortality can be achieved.

*japa tapa sandhyā homa yajña teji
dhari niraveda patha,
ātmabhagatire e nṛtyu samsāre
mañli mu eka mata?*

Ritualism witnesses the birth of sectarianism and religious fundamentalism. People mistake the superficiality of religious observances as the essence of religion. A person is said to be religious only if he is sincere and meticulous in observing the religious rituals. This according to Bhima Bhoi is a mockery of religion because religious conviction and practice have no meaning if it does not help one to share the weal and woe of one's fellowmen. The ritualism presupposes the priestly mediation which is still more unfortunate. The so-called places of worship become places for exploiting the simple and the credulous. The so-called guardians of religion become exploiters. As a result he deplores that the sacred places of worship becomes defile.

*SriPuruṣottama Kapilāsa dhāma tahuṁ
uthilani dhama,
tirthamāne sabu bhṛaṣṭa hoileni
kāhinre nāhina brahma^s.*

He does not find any rationale behind the practice of

pilgrimage. Since God exists in every particular and every place, everything is sacred and every place is holy. Forgetting this the ignorant undertake long pilgrimage with the hope of salvation. Since everyone is potentially God, one need not go outside and realise him. He need not go to caves, temples to find him but one has to turn the mind within. God can be served not by sacramental offerings, rites and rituals in the temples but by serving the creation because the created world is nothing other than Him. If one looks for God over and above his manifestations, he is bound to be disappointed. One becomes enlightened when one realizes divinity in every structure. This is spiritual progress according to Bhima Bhoi. The religion should help people to expand their vision wherein they realize God in its essential nature.

na jö!i chäridigare pheruachha
tirthabrata boli kari, jahinre lodiba
tahn achhanti brahma bujhiba jebe
bichäri⁹.

His surging love for his fellowmen made him appear as a non-compromising crusader against social discrimination. Hinduism in its decadent form was insuement in dividing people on caste-line. The sense of innate superiority and inferiority led to inhuman exploitation of the so-called low by the so-called high. Religious obscurantism coupled with the diseased social outlook heightened the suffering of the common man. Brahminism in its degenerate form floated views and doctrines which made people feel that God is prerogative of the select few. Scriptures were interpreted according to the convenience of the so-called upper class. Bhima Bhoi wanted to bring home the spirit of unity by fostering the vedantic ideals through his writings. Spiritualism admits of no distinctions of caste, colour, creed. The practice of spiritualism consists in cultivation of cardinal values like love, compassion, non-violence etc. The vision of unity

makes one see one in everything. This brings him to make irresistible love for every man and woman, mobile and immobile. According to Bhima Bhoi the distinction of caste is man-made and does not enjoy the sanction of scriptures. Love and compassion are the inevitable expression of spiritual vision serve as the cementing force to keep the apparently diverse people together. Spiritualism is both a regulative and harmonising force in the collective body. There appears to be an element of ambivalence in his views about caste. On the one hand he denies any distinction what so ever far less division on the basis of caste. Even he goes to the extent of denying distinction between male and female.

chhataisa kula je bāuna pātaka
je achha stiri puruṣa,
uccha nicha vāraṇa na kari nāma re
saraṇa pasa¹⁰.

On the other hand he observes that God being one and omnipresent, there is only class and the perceived differences are only result of the divine play.

tini brahmaṇḍare lodi āsa tumbhe
eka jana eka jāti,
sehi sabunku sata jāti karichhi
tāhāra rachilā pruthvi¹¹.

It simply means that while everything is one from the point of view of essence, one can concede to the fact of differences on the basis of one's aptitude and ability. So the essential unity and the functional multiplicity can go hand in hand. This seems to go parallel with the view espoused in the Gita where Lord Kṛṣṇa observes that the four-fold caste based on disposition and quality are created by Him. The four-fold distinction which pertain to one's nature and potentiality are true to the state of nature. But that does not contradict the view that despite the differences in the level of functionalism, we are

essentially the sparks of the same divinity. But the distinction on the basis of disposition and ability do not in any sense lend credence to the caste-distinction which degenerated into a hereditary classification.

His concern for fellow human beings did not stem from a theoretical conviction of unity but from the innermost core of his heart. Devaluation of values, degenerate religious practices, social discrimination deeply moved him. He prayed almighty to save the humanity from the imminent ruin.

*je abā achha bhagata sambhāli
rakha jagata,
bhaṇe Bhima Kandha pruthvi banchāa
a kaḷikāle¹².*

He also prays God to salvage men from moral degeneration and wishes that all people should rise above illusion and duplicity and have an emasculative character.

*sambhāla tumara jagata bhagata
e dharmare je achhanti,
kāhāri manare chhanda māyā na pasu
nirmala karāa mati¹³.*

This has led scholars to conclude that Bhima Bhoi was trying to champion the cause of humanism. Humanism as an articulated system of thought has been enunciated by different schools of thought with their respective vision of man, God and the Universe. Despite the differences in details of their exposition, humanists by and large agree with regard to the nature of man in relation to the non-human existents. They assume that man is free, dignified and is the ultimate end and that the non-human existents, i.e., animals and plants are the means to have an instrumental value. They have an existential value in so far as they subserve the interest of man. But the spiritual humanism of Bhima Bhoi does not treat man as an end in relation to non-humans who are means. The vedantic vision of unity made him

think beyond the human species and embrace the non-humans in the sweep. He prays the *alekha* not only to save the human species but also the animals, birds, insects who are none other than one kindred selves and the Lord Himself.

... *rakṣyā nabakhaṇḍa mahi anādi alekha*

... *rakṣyā kara swāmi naruloka*

... *kita patanga jalapoka*

... *saraṇa sambhāli rakṣa e jantu jibaka*¹⁴.

Significantly he never left room for transcendentalism. He never wished to lift man to the level of God though he prayed for salvation of one and all. The difference between the animate, man and non-man is one of degree not of kind. Therefore everything becomes an end. Every manifestation is the living expression of God. The spirituality in the hands of Bhima Bhoi comes to embrace the whole within its ambit and it entails a form of humanism which transcends man while securing the interest of man to the highest possible extent. Here to say that Bhima Bhoi's humanism transcends man does not imply that it is transcendental - rather it means removal of ignorance and discovery of the innate divinity present in man. Bhima Bhoi wished the salvation of humanity. Salvation for him meant a life of perfection. He did not seek for a vedantic *mukti* of losing one's identity in the bosom of the infinite nor did he seek liberation of the visistadvaitins according to which the ultimate human destiny is to live in proximity with God in Vaikuntha enjoying His *lilā* (the divine sport). What he envisioned for his fellowmen was the society of men and women who not only share and care for one another but also imbued with the love for the rest of the creation. In him there is a tension between spiritual optimism and stark realism. When the realist in him makes him lament that people with eyes are no better than blind and people with intellect are directionless - therefore he only wishes that the summum bonum of life is to be truly human.

chakṣyu thāi kaṇā, buddhi thai baṇā
bāṭuḷa heleni samaste he,
je heba manuśya jāṇiba abasya
bujhāi kaluchhi jete he¹⁵.

His deep agony finds classic expression when he prays God that he is no more able to withstand the suffering of beings around him. He says that he is prepared to court hell in lieu of the upliftment of all.

prāṇinka ārata dukha apramita
dekhū dekhū kebā sahu,
mo jivana pachhe narke padithāu
jagata uddhāra pau¹⁶.

Though there is an implicit attempt to infuse the vedantic ideal of universality, his writings steer clear of any reference to transcendentalism or mysticism. The notion of salvation is thought in terms of liberation from degenerate, exploitative socio-religious system and establishment of the humanity on the ideals of universal love and co-existence. He talks of collective salvation which is paramount to an extent that he would prefer collective liberation (*sarva mukti*) even at the cost of his own salvation. Similar view point is professed by Swami Vivekananda when having been deeply moved by the exploitation and suffering of his compatriots writes in a letter to his Western friend on July 9, 1897.

“I have lost all wish for my salvation ... May I be born again and again and suffer thousands of miseries, so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in, is the sum total of all souls - and above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species is the object of my worship”.

This shows how the vedantic convictions inevitably manifest in form of socialistic thinking. Bhima Bhoi, being a true

enables man to think beyond himself and see the diversity as the multiple expression of the one. That is why he prays the Lord to cause rational awakening in one and all so that there is efflorescence of universal love.

ekoisipura chauda bhuvana jeunthare

jehuchhanti,

sabhu ghate prabhu hetu chetā dia

uthu alekha bhagat'¹⁸.

This has affinity with the exhortation of Lord Kṛṣṇa in the Gita where he dwells upon the importance of the arousal of discriminative intellect (*vyavasāyātmikā buddhi*). The rational discrimination employed in the determination of action is termed

as vyavashyüilnikä budd,hi in the Gita. It consists in non attachment to sensuous objects and is dominated by singleminded devotion to moral efforts vyavasüyütmikü buddhirekz' ha kurunandana (B.G., 119 41)

Thus it can be seen how the humanism of Bhima Bhoi stands distinguished from other forms of humanism. A secular humanist assumes man to be the highest reality and the human values are by the man and for the man. There is explicit rejection of the transcendental and absolute autonomy is accorded to man who is the creator of his own world and a system of values.

"There is no higher Being than man himself, so man must create his own values, set his own standards and goals, and work out his own salvation. There is nothing transcending man's own power and intelligence, so he cannot look for any support from beyond himself, though, equally, he need not submit himself to any judgement beyond his own or that of his society¹⁹."

The scientific humanism also subscribes to the basic contention of secular humanism in conceiving values in terms of human well-being and rejection of the noumenal in favour of the phenomenal. The humanistic ideal of Bhima Bhoi is not based on secular morality but on spiritual values. The spiritual humanism, therefore, obviates the evils of materialism on the one hand and supernaturalism on the other. The conception of the society according to Bhima Bhoi does not rest on the reality of man and human interest but on the essential identity of all existence. It is a vision of spiritual community where the wellbeing of the rest and man being the most rationally developed ought to shoulder the responsibility of taking care of the rest of the creation, The all-embracing love emanating from vision of unity led him to empathise for all. The feeling of oneness transcends the opposition between altruism and egoism consummating in the ukge for service to one and all - sarvabhüta

hite rata)).

A secular humanist by way of glorifying the secular decries sacred. In course of rejecting the transcendental, they reject the sacred. Quite mistakenly they equate religion with the sacred. Hence a dichotomy is created between sacred and secular. But in the conceptual framework of Bhima Bhoi the sacred is equated with the secular. 'Illis is brought Out as he contends that the sacred core of all religions is one and the same and the sacred is constituted by the set of cardinal values which help us to bind everything together. So the truly sacred is truly secular. A sacred need not involve reference to the transcendental and the secular need not be defined in terms of the profane. Since every particular at every core is divine, there is hardly any room for social discrimination of any kind. As the same spark of divinity throbs in every being everyone has the right to realize perfection. Hence in a true religion there is no room for privilege or status quo. It open for all irrespective of caste and creed.

sadguru dharma ehi, kähäku manä nahin.

eka javakara nuhanti thäkura . achhi
saburi bhäga, kotha loka heba antara
nohiba jeun mane bhajuthibeti -aga²⁰.

This shows how spirituality in the practical domain takes the form of socialism. If humanism takes human beings as the highest reality and human interest as of focal concern, then it is bound to degenerate into individualism. Hence humanism in order to be truly socialistic has to base itself on the spirit of vision of unity. A spiritual vision cannot but express itself in a mode of ^{holistic} living where every other is treated as the expression of ^{one's} own self. So Bhima Bhoi is a spiritualist whose humanism ^{does} not plead for the exclusive cause of human species but

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pleads for the welfare of all. Bhima Bhoi, a 13th century humanist realised this and advocated spiritual humanism. Notes and References:

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 95.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 33.
8. Ibid., 95.
9. Ibid., 92.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 70.
12. Bhajanamālā 1.37.
13. Stutichintāmaṇi, 97.
14. Bhajanamālā 1.17.
15. Ibid., 1.66.
16. Stutichintāmaṇi, 27.
17. Swami Vivekananda, *My Religion Is*, p.49.

18. Stutichintāmani, 24.
19. J. Macquarrie, God and Secularity, London, 1968, p.48.
20. Bhajanamālā, 1.62.

